

Spring Creek (Lewistown), Montana

By Martha Foster, Ph. D.

In the 1860s, a group of Red River Métis bison hunters, with ties to both Pembina (North Dakota) and the Red River Settlement, followed the diminishing bison herds to the Milk River of Montana. As the bison disappeared there, these families moved south to the Judith Basin of central Montana, where some of the last herds still grazed. The transition from a bison-product economy tested not only their economic resourcefulness, but also their very identity. Employing a variety of social and economic strategies, they met a series of challenges as the bison-based economy collapsed and as cattle operations and later, homesteaders took over the Judith Basin. Adopting a complex and multilayered set of ascribed and self-ascribed public identities, they were determined to maintain their economic and social survival.

The band, which I have, for the sake of convenience, referred to as the Spring Creek band, is also known as the “Lewistown Métis” (although not all of the families lived within what would later become the central Montana town of Lewistown). These related families settled on the tributaries of Spring Creek in 1879, and subsequently founded Lewistown, one of the oldest continuously occupied Métis settlements in Montana. The Spring Creek families and their relatives who remained on the Milk River formed the kinship network that has come to be known as the “Lewistown/Havre/Glasgow” triangle or the Lewistown/Milk River triangle. Some of their relatives traveled southwest from the Milk River to settle at St. Peter’s Mission, where Canadian Métis and Cree joined them after 1885. These families established settlements along the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains and became the second principal cluster of Metis families in Montana. (Contributed by Marty Foster, from *Metis Legacy*.)



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